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ABSTRACT

A study comparing the request strategies of native and non-native speakers of English and Spanish is reported. Subjects were 29 American and 78 European students with varied first languages, enrolled in English and Spanish courses at the University of the Basque Country (Spain). Data were obtained using a general background questionnaire and a discourse completion task. Results show some differences in the use of request strategies by Americans and Europeans, in both English and Spanish. Americans use more direct and fewer conventionally indirect strategies than European speakers in English, and use fewer mitigating supportives in both English and Spanish. Non-native European English appears to have some pragmatic characteristics closer to British English than American English. Use of mitigating supportives by Europeans was much higher than previously reporting in research. In the case of Spanish requests, an opposite pattern emerged, with learners using conventionally indirect strategies and mitigating supportives less often than native speakers. Results suggest that second language learners and native speakers are aware of the different situations and use different degrees of directness according to context. Implications for the teaching of English as a second language are examined. Contains 36 references. (MSE)

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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS: AMERICAN VS. EUROPEAN REQUESTS

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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS: AMERICAN VS. EUROPEAN REQUESTS

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This paper focuses on interlanguage pragmatics and cross-cultural communication by examining requests uttered by native and non-native speakers of English and Spanish. Specifically, it describes the request strategies and the use of mitigating supportives by European and American speakers in English and Spanish. Participants were American and European university students who were attending Spanish and English language courses at the University of the Basque Country during the academic year 1993-94. The data were collected via a Discourse Completion Test and codified according to the CCSARP coding manual (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989).

The results show some differences in the use of request strategies by Americans and Europeans both in English and Spanish. It was also found that the use of mitigating supportives is more common among advanced non-native speakers and that it is closely related to linguistic competence.

INTRODUCTION

The study of speech acts from a linguistic perspective, comparing either the linguistic realization of speech acts in different languages (*contrastive pragmatics*), or the speech acts produced by native speakers and second language learners (*interlanguage pragmatics*) can be relevant for several reasons. First, it can contribute to theoretical pragmatics because it can shed light on the universal principles which govern the production of speech acts and the degree to which these rules of language use vary from language to language. Second, cross-linguistic comparisons of speech act realizations can also contribute to studies in cross-cultural communication. The study of speech as a cultural phenomenon and its role in cultural identity has shown that different communities vary in their production and interpretation of linguistic behaviour (Gumperz, 1982). The linguistic approach to the study of speech acts can not only identify but also provide a detailed description of the interactional styles corresponding to different speech communities (deKadt, 1992; Omar, 1992; Eslamirasekh, 1993). Finally, the cross-linguistic study of speech acts can also contribute to the development of second language acquisition research by identifying the strategies used by learners in the production of speech acts. This approach is commonly referred as *interlanguage pragmatics* and has been defined as "the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language" (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 3).

The analysis of speech acts from a linguistic perspective has focused both on the perception and production of speech acts in experimental and natural settings (Kasper &

Dahl, 1991). It has been suggested that there is a universal and a language specific component in the realization of speech acts. The universal pragmatic knowledge is shared across languages and explains, for example, that the same basic strategies (direct, conventionally indirect and nonconventional indirect or hints) are used in the realization of requests (Blum-Kulka & Olhstain, 1984). At the same time, there are different interactional styles and important cross-linguistic differences in the selection, distribution and realization of speech acts. For example, German speakers are more direct than British English speakers when uttering requests (House & Kasper, 1981) and Hebrew speakers are more direct than American English speakers (Blum-Kulka, 1982). Nevertheless, the universality vs. culture-specificity issue is still controversial (Fraser, 1985; Wierzbicka, 1991) particularly, when non-Western languages and cultures are considered (Kachru, 1994).

Interlanguage pragmatics is related to the concept of communicative competence and specifically, to that of pragmatic competence (Bachman, 1990). Pragmatic or actional competence is a component of communicative competence that has been defined as "the ability to convey and understand communicative intent by performing and interpreting speech acts and language functions" (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell, 1994). Lack of pragmatic competence or pragmatic failure is more easily observable than pragmatically competent language use. Pragmatic failure can take place at different levels (Blum-Kulka, 1991; Thomas, 1983). In the case of pragmalinguistic failure the learner uses linguistic elements which do not correspond to native forms and can produce breakdowns in communication or socially inappropriate utterances. At the sociopragmatic and cultural level, the learner produces an inappropriate utterance because he/she is not aware of the social and cultural rules affecting speech act realization in a particular language. These rules can involve a different perception of social psychological elements such as social distance, relative power and status or legitimization of a specific behaviour.

Pragmatic failure differs from other types of failure because it is not easily recognizable by interlocutors who may judge the speaker as being impolite or uncooperative or attribute the pragmatic errors to the speaker's personality. Moreover, pragmatic failure is common not only among students with low proficiency in the target language but also among advanced language learners presenting a good command of grammatical and lexical elements (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990).

A speech act that has been the focus of attention in interlanguage pragmatics is that of requests. Requests are pre-event acts which have been considered *face-threatening* (Brown and Levinson, 1978) as they impose the speaker's interests on the hearer. Requests can be regarded as a constraint on the hearer's freedom of action and for this reason, requests in different languages present a rich variety of strategies and modifiers necessary to mitigate their impositive effect. Requests are complex speech acts which involve a relationship of different elements. These elements have been identified by Blum-Kulka (1991) as the *request schema* which includes requestive goals subject to a cultural filter, linguistic encoding (strategies, perspective and modifiers), situational parameters (distance, power, legitimization) and the social meaning of the request according to cultural and situational factors.

The cross-linguistic comparison of requests uttered by native and non-native speakers has revealed that there are similarities and differences in the selection and distribution of linguistic elements. Non-native speakers have been reported to use a more restrictive and less complex requesting repertoire than native speakers (Blum-Kulka, 1982, 1991; House & Kasper, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Niki & Tajika, 1994). When the requesting strategies of native speakers and learners have been compared, learners have been found to be more direct than native speakers in some studies (House & Kasper, 1987; Tanaka 1988; Koike, 1989; Fukushima, 1990) but not in others (Blum-Kulka 1982, 1991). Learners' requests have been consistently reported to differ from native speakers' in the fact that learners modify their requests externally by adding more mitigating supportives than native speakers. The most common mitigating supportive is the grounder, which provides reasons and explanations to justify the need to make a request. This behaviour, known as the *waffle phenomenon* affects the length of the utterance and has been observed in interlanguage behaviour in Hebrew (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986); English (House & Kasper, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1989) and German (Faerch & Kasper, 1989). Learners have also been found to share with native speakers sensitivity to contextual constraints when they select requesting strategies (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Kasper 1989; Niki & Tajika, 1994).

The most common explanation for pragmatic failure is pragmatic negative transfer (Thomas, 1983) defined as "the influence of L1 pragmatic competence on IL pragmatic knowledge that differs from the L2 target" (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 10). Pragmatic negative transfer can take place at the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic levels but cannot account for all types of pragmatic failure. In some cases, such as the *waffle phenomenon*, learners present pragmatic behaviour that is different from both the L1 and the L2 and seems to be characteristic of interlanguage. Pragmatic competence and pragmatic failure can reflect interlanguage processes which are common in second language acquisition such as overgeneralization, simplification and reduction. Pragmatic competence is also interrelated to other dimensions of communicative competence and pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic failure can be caused by lack of linguistic or sociolinguistic competence.

Research in contrastive and interlanguage pragmatics and particularly, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989), have proved to be relevant for the study of second language acquisition, cross-cultural and theoretical pragmatics. Nevertheless, further studies including different first and second languages are still necessary in order to confirm previous findings and provide a deeper understanding of pragmatic competence in cross-linguistic communication. The requesting behaviour of European and American speakers in English and Spanish can be extremely relevant not only for its contribution to interlanguage pragmatics but also for cross-cultural studies on the language behaviour in European-American communication.

This paper aims at investigating the similarities and differences in the requesting behaviour presented by American and European speakers in English and Spanish. The specific research questions address those aspects of requesting behaviour which have received more attention in the literature: requesting strategies and mitigating supportives. The research questions are the following: i) Do European and American speakers use the same request strategies in English and Spanish? ii) Do European and American speakers modify their requests in the same way by using mitigating supportives?

METHOD

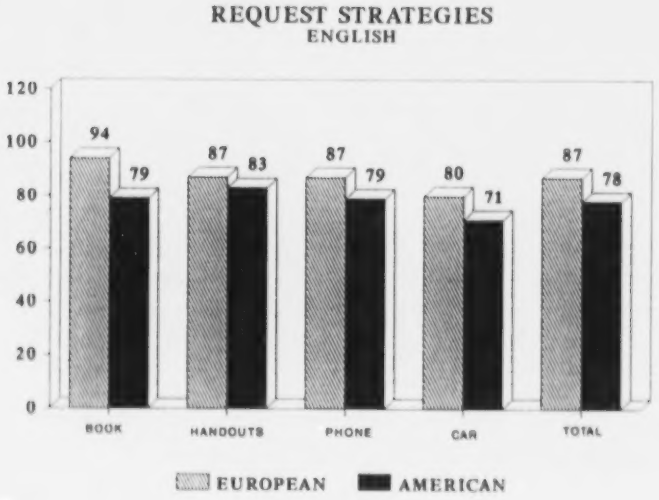
Participants were 106 university students, 29 Americans and 78 Europeans with various first languages (Swedish, Spanish, Norwegian, Italian, French, Greek, Danish, German, Portuguese). American and European (non-Spanish) subjects attended Spanish language courses at the University of the Basque Country while Spanish subjects were undergraduates majoring in English Studies at the University of the Basque Country. Non-native speakers of English (European, including Spanish) reported a higher level of proficiency in English than non-native speakers of Spanish (European non-Spanish and American) in Spanish.

The data were obtained via a general background questionnaire and a discourse completion test (DCT), based on the CCSARP. All the participants completed the DCT both in English and in Spanish. English was an L2 for all Europeans (n=78) while Spanish was the L1 for some Europeans (Spanish subjects, n=48) and an L2 for the rest of the Europeans (n=30). In the case of Americans (n=29), English was the L1 and Spanish the L2. The DCTs necessarily produce more stereotyped responses but they allow comparability among different groups because the contexts in which speech acts are produced are controlled. The DCT used in this research contained the following request situations: a) A teacher asks a student to get a book from the library; b) A student asks a teacher for handouts given in a previous class; c) You ask a colleague to make a long distance phone call from his/her apartment; d) A traffic warden asks a driver to move his/her car. The DCTs were codified according to the CCSARP coding manual (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989). Only two aspects of request behaviour will be analysed in this paper: the request strategy and mitigating supportive moves.

RESULTS

The general results corresponding to the use of requesting strategies in English and Spanish by all the subjects in the sample (n=106) were the following. The most frequent strategy used in English and Spanish when uttering requests was the conventionally indirect, that is, "procedures that realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in a given language" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 201). The conventionally indirect strategy was used in 85.2% of the English requests and 72.9% of the Spanish requests and included preparatories (Can I..?, Could I..?), and suggestory formula (How about..?). The direct strategy, which is more explicit, is "realized by requests syntactically marked as such (...) or by other verbal means that name the act as a request" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 201). This strategy was used in 10% of the English requests and 25.37% of the Spanish requests and included mood derivables (Give me...), explicit performatives (I am asking..), hedged performatives (I must ask) and locution derivables (you must/should/have to). The nonconventional indirect strategy (strong and mild hints) realize "the request by either partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act or by reliance on contextual clues" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 201). This strategy was used in 4.8% of the English requests and 1.72% of the Spanish requests. The specific percentages corresponding to the distribution of the conventionally indirect strategy in English in European and American requests are presented in Figure 1.

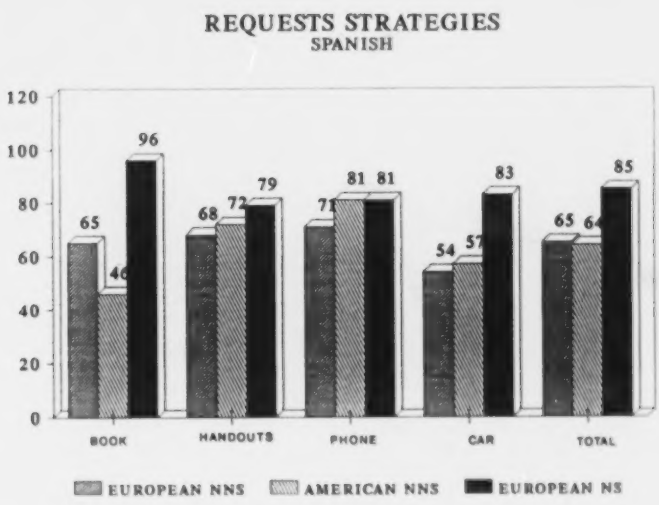
FIGURE 1



It can be observed that in English, both native and non-native speakers use the conventionally indirect strategy less frequently in the '*car*' situation, in which a policeman asks a driver to move his/her car. American speakers use this strategy less often than European speakers in the four situations. Native speakers of American English tend to use more direct strategies in requests not only because they use the conventionally indirect strategy more often but also because they use the direct strategy in 17.47% of their requests and Europeans in 7.8%.

The use of the conventionally indirect strategy in Spanish by European native and non-native speakers and by American non-native speakers is presented in Figure 2.

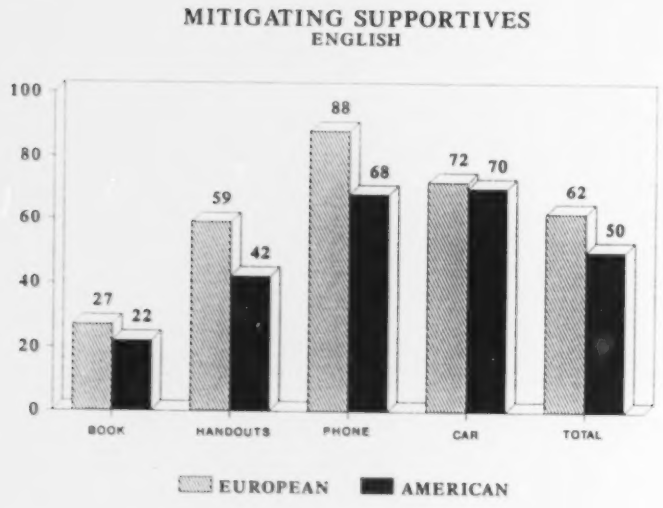
FIGURE 2



The situational variation is less consistent in Spanish requests. European non-native speakers of Spanish use the conventionally indirect strategy less often in the '*car*' situation, Americans in the '*book*' situation and European native speakers (Spanish) in the 'handout' situation. As compared to the English data, a different pattern is found in Spanish requests. In the case of Spanish requests, native speakers use the conventionally indirect strategy more often than non-native speakers. Native speakers of Spanish also use the direct strategy less often (13.12%) than American (34.1%) and European (33.8%) learners. Thus, American and European non-native speakers present a similar pattern when choosing their request strategies, a pattern which is different from that of European native speakers.

The percentages pertaining to the use of mitigating supportives by European and American speakers of English are presented in figure 3.

FIGURE 3



Non-native speakers of English use more mitigating supportives than native speakers in the four situations when uttering requests in English. Both groups use fewer supportives in '*book*' situation in which the teacher asks a student for a book than in the '*phone*' and '*car*' situations. The following examples of the '*phone*' situation (1) show that non-native requests tend to be longer because they include more mitigating supportives.

(1) American Native Speakers

-I have to make a really important, long distance phone call. Might I borrow your phone?
-I need to call California, don't worry I'll charge it to my credit card.
-I need to make a really important call to the States. My wife is in the hospital.

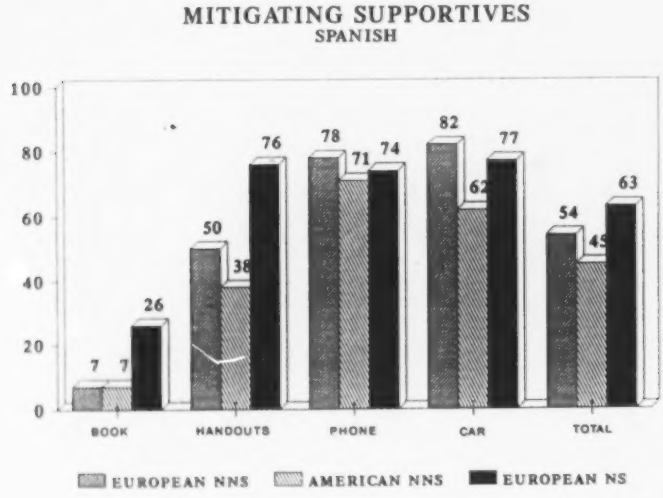
European Non-Native Speakers

-I need to make a long distance phone call. ! would be very glad if I could phone from here, and of course, I will pay you the call.
-I need to ask you for a favour, it's very important. Would you mind letting me use your telephone for a long distance phone call?
-I really need to make a phone call to my mother in Sweden. She's in the hospital. It's a collect call.

-I would like to call my brother in Denmark. Could you please let me use your phone, of course, I'll pay.

The percentages corresponding to the use of mitigating supportives in Spanish are presented in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4



In Spanish fewer supportives are also used in the '*book*' situation and more in the '*phone*' and '*car*' situations. Native speakers of Spanish use more mitigating supportives than non-native speakers and European non-native speakers of Spanish use more supportives than Americans. Americans use fewer supportives than Europeans both in English and Spanish and non-natives use more supportives than natives in English but not in Spanish. Some examples of the 'phone' situation in Spanish are the following (2):

(2) Spanish Native Speakers

-Necesito hacer una llamada. ¿Te importaría que usase tu teléfono? Te pagaré la conferencia. (I have to make a call. Do you mind if I use your phone? I'll pay for the call.)
-Tengo que hacer una llamada al extranjero. Si quieres te doy luego dinero porque es muy importante que la haga ahora. (I have to phone abroad. I can pay for that later but it is important for me to make this call now)

-¿Puedo hacer una llamada al extranjero? No te preocupes por el dinero, luego te lo daré. (Can I phone abroad? Don't worry about money, I'll pay you later)

Non-Native Speakers (European and American)

-Perdón. ¿Puedo hacer una llamada al extranjero aquí? (Excuse me. Can I phone abroad from here?)
-¿Podría usar tu teléfono, por favor? (Could I use your phone, please?)
-Por favor, ¿te molesta que use tu teléfono? (Please, do you mind if I use your phone?)
-Teléfono extranjero por favor. (Foreign phone, please)

DISCUSSION

The analyses of the request strategies and mitigating supportives used by Americans and Europeans in English and Spanish show some interesting patterns along the cross-cultural dimension of Americans vs. Europeans, and the interlanguage dimension of native speakers vs. learners.

Regarding the cross-cultural dimension, it can be observed that even though the conventionally indirect strategy is the preferred strategy, Americans use more direct and fewer conventionally indirect strategies than European speakers in English. Moreover, Americans use fewer mitigating supportives both in English and Spanish. These two characteristics of American requests could produce an effect of directness in American speech. European English has been defined as "the use of English by Europeans to communicate with other Europeans" (Berns, 1995, p. 24), and it includes native (British, Irish) and non-native speakers (German, French, Swedish, Spanish, etc.). Non-native European English[1] seems to present some pragmatic characteristics which are closer to a native variety of European English (British English) than to American English. In fact, reports on the use of the conventionally indirect strategy by native speakers of British English are very close (about 90%) to the percentages found in this study (87%) (Faerch & Kasper, 1989; House & Kasper, 1987). Nevertheless, the use of mitigating supportives by Europeans is much higher (61.7%) than previous reports on the use of supportives in British English (23%) (House, 1989; House & Kasper, 1987) and would provide supporting evidence for the *waffle phenomenon*. Non-native European English would share some pragmalinguistic characteristics with British English and at the same time present others which seem to be typically associated with non-native requesting behaviour.

Pragmatic competence in European English has to be explained as related to the extensive use of English for communicative interaction among non-native speakers in Europe. English is the most common language in intra-European communication and it is not only a second but also a third or fourth language in multilingual Europe (Baetens Beardsmore, 1993; Cenoz & Valencia, 1994). European English is "a medium for expressing culturally and socially unique ideas, feelings, and identities to people in the world, native and non-native speakers alike" (Berns, 1995, p. 24). In this context, non-native European

English does not necessarily have to be considered as a deficient variety of American or British English but as a relatively stable non-native variety presenting its own pragmatic characteristics. Therefore, the way in which speech acts are carried out in non-native European English could be regarded as a *deviation* rather than a *mistake* (Kachru, 1992). Even though English is a foreign language in most European countries, non-native European English, the same as other non-native varieties of English (Indian, Malaysian, Nigerian, etc.) seems to present some specific features.

In the case of Spanish requests, the pattern that emerges is the opposite of English requests. Learners use the conventionally indirect strategy less often than native speakers and they also use fewer mitigating supportives. The use of more direct strategies by language learners is not surprising and has been reported in previous research involving language varieties which use a large proportion of conventionally indirect strategies (Tanaka, 1988; Koike, 1989; Fukushima, 1990; House & Kasper, 1987). The data on mitigating supportives in Spanish seems to contradict previous data in which learners with different levels of proficiency have been reported to *waffle* by producing more supportive moves than native speakers of either the first or the second language (House, 1989; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; House and Kasper, 1987; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986). We argue that the different behaviour presented by learners of English and of Spanish can be explained in terms of language competence and the interdependence of the different dimensions of communicative competence. Linguistic competence does not guarantee pragmatic competence but it is a necessary pre-requisite to pragmatic competence (Hoffman-Hicks, 1992). As it has already been stated, non-native speakers of English reported a higher level of proficiency than non-native speakers of Spanish. In fact, European non-native speakers of English are university students majoring in English studies (native speakers of Spanish) or European students who study Spanish as an additional third, fourth or fifth language after studying English for a large number of years. On the contrary, in the case of Spanish, non-native speakers' competence can be labelled as *lower intermediate* according to the learners' own reports and the language courses in which they are currently enrolled. Non-native speakers of English are expected to present the necessary linguistic resources to produce supportive moves and feel comfortable enough with the language so as to produce longer utterances. Non-native speakers of Spanish would have less linguistic resources at their disposal and prefer shorter utterances. A careful review of studies reporting that learners *waffle* shows that learners who waffle are at the intermediate or advanced levels (House & Kasper, 1987; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986) and that learners at the lower intermediate level have been reported not to waffle (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986). Our study supports these findings and suggests that the interdependence among the different dimensions of communicative competence and the influence of linguistic competence should be regarded as crucial when explaining the *waffle phenomenon*.

As far as sociopragmatic competence is concerned, the comparison of native and non-native speakers of English and Spanish reveals that both groups are aware of the different situations and use different degrees of directness according to the context, as previously reported (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Kasper, 1989; Rintell & Mitchell 1989). The comparison of English and Spanish indicates that even though contextual influence is observable in both cases, the pattern is more consistent in English and could be affected by linguistic competence.

Another finding of this study concerns the use of the conventionally indirect strategy by native speakers of Spanish. The fact that this strategy is very commonly used (84.8%) emphasizes the need to refer to language varieties rather than languages as it contradicts previous data on Argentinian Spanish (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989) in which the conventionally indirect strategy was only used by 60% of the population.

This study underlines the need to examine pragmatic competence as related to other components of communicative competence. It also discusses the pragmatic competence of non-native Europeans who use English as a language of intra-European and international communication. These issues have important implications for language teaching. They highlight the need to teach the different components of communicative competence and to develop communicative activities in which these components are related. This study also raises the issue of the desirable model of pragmatic competence in foreign language contexts particularly, when non-native European English is considered. Rather than acquiring a specific model of pragmatic competence, students could benefit from developing pragmatic awareness in order to interpret the utterances produced by native and non-native speakers and to know the effect of their own productions on the hearer.

Further research involving observational data is certainly needed in order to confirm our findings (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992). The analysis of other speech acts and implicatures could also help to develop our understanding of interlanguage pragmatics and to determine the pragmatic characteristics of non-native European English. Finally, research involving different levels of proficiency could also be useful in order to confirm the effect of linguistic competence on the *waffle phenomenon*.

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NOTE

[1]The label '*non-native European English*' is used here in order to exclude European native speakers of English: British and Irish.

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APPENDIX: DISCOURSE COMPLETION TEST

1. You are a secondary school teacher and you ask one of your students (Peter Jones) to get a book from the library. What would you say to Peter?

_____

_____

2. You didn't come to class yesterday and you ask a fellow student (Ann) for her lecture notes. What would you say to her?

_____

_____

3. You are in Spain and you really need to make a long distance phone call. You are staying at Pedro's (your colleague) apartment. What would you say to Pedro?

_____

_____

4. You are a traffic warden and you see a car parked in front of the post office. There is a woman in the car. You want her to move the car. What would you say to the woman?

_____

_____